



Lessons From the Hill

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They came, they saw, they went, and now they're hoping to make a difference.

Ten women advocates from politically volatile Northern Ireland flew home to Ulster last week armed with a two-week civics lesson from inside the Beltway.

The women were participants in the International Women's Democracy Center's Community Advocate Mentor Program, in which they learned firsthand the intricacies of the U.S. democratic process — from lobbying to lawmaking — through two weeks of workshops and lectures, culminating in a Congressional shadowing day last Wednesday.

The program, now in its fifth year, has helped to advance women in leadership positions and strengthen their role as effective lobbyists in their respective organizations during Northern Ireland's transition to a peaceful democratic government.

"Up to now there haven't been that many women involved in government, but now is the opportunity. Now is when it can happen," said program participant Pamela Dooley, a labor advocate with the British trade union UNISON.

In the past, Dooley said, "there wasn't a culture of women [in politics]. But there can be a culture of women."

The region has been mired in violent political turmoil, the result of a century-old conflict between the Protestant majority and Catholic minority that have made up Northern Ireland's population since its split from the Republic of Ireland in 1921.

The Good Friday Agreement, reached on April 10, 1998, called for a peaceful power-sharing arrangement between Protestants and Catholics in a devolved government. But violence between the Irish Republican Army — the militant wing of the Catholic Sinn Fein party — and Protestant extremist groups has led the British government to suspend the 108-member Northern Ireland Assembly four times since 1999. The Assembly hasn't met since its last suspension Oct. 14, 2002, due to the discovery of Sinn Fein intelligence gathering for the IRA.

Without the benefit of a functioning democratic Legislature, lobbyists not only lack the power to affect public policy, but also lack a model for understanding how to advocate on behalf of their organizations once the Assembly is restored power, said Dooley.

"Without having an Assembly we haven't had the opportunity to do things like this," she said. "There's no one to lobby. You can't lobby the MPs because they don't have power."

But recent discussion between the British and Irish governments and the two leading parties in

Northern Ireland — Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionists and Gerry Adams' Sinn Fein — give Ulster residents hope for restored peace and democratic governance.

"If you've lived in conflict, which we have, the whole emphasis was on surviving," Dooley said. "We have moved on a bit from that. That will change within the next few months, and it has been very helpful to learn the tools we can put in place to further our own peace process. It is now about trying to find the opportunities for people to understand there is a different way of life. "

This year's participants represented both sides of the conflict — five Protestant, five Catholic. And even though they interacted cordially, "the women didn't talk too much amongst themselves because the politics are so divisive," said Kelly Cooper, development intern with IWDC. "They focus more on the learning environment of the program rather than the political proclivities that they brought on an individual basis."

Program participant Pam Tilson, an advocate for Age Concern Northern Ireland, said meetings last week with AARP leadership helped translate directly the American lobbying strategy of advocates for elderly interests.

"The issues that the AARP lobbyists have been working on are the exact same issues that I've been working on," she said. However, the AARP is able to lobby people "who've got power" — conditions she hopes for in the near future. "The people who I spend most of my time lobbying don't have power to change anything," she said.

Wednesday the women shadowed Reps. Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.), Betty McCollum (D-Minn.), James Langevin (D-R.I.), Joe Crowley (D-N.Y.), Earl Pomeroy (D-N.D.), Peter King (R-N.Y.), Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), Lois Capps (D-Calif.), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Sam Farr (D-Calif.) through floor votes, press briefings and meetings with lobbyists. (Incidentally, this was the same day the Capitol was flooded with Irish immigrants lobbying in support of the McCain-Kennedy immigration bill.)

The timing of their arrival, amid a budget season in which Members are bombarded with funding priority requests, provided the perfect opportunity for understanding the lobbying process, said McCarthy.

McCarthy has made frequent trips to Northern Ireland in recent years, once with the goal of strengthening relations between U.S. and Northern Ireland politicians, and once as a fact-finding mission with other female Members to increase women's political involvement in the area.

"Around the world when women have risen to the top, they've forgotten to take others with them," said McCarthy. "It's important to remember that everyone had a helping hand. This is about giving back."

McCollum, who joined McCarthy on the trips to Northern Ireland, added that the program provides "opportunity to make sure in Northern Ireland that women's voices are heard early and often to move forward the peace process."

Congress unanimously supported the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Several of the Members who participated in CAMP have membership in committees such as the Bipartisan Ad Hoc Committee for Irish Affairs, which has hosted meetings with Irish political leaders in the U.S. to encourage compliance with the agreement's call for peace. Meetings will continue in the U.S. with Gerry Adams, among others, this week, said McCarthy.

Members repeated the like goal Wednesday of exposing CAMP participants to the U.S. lawmaking process as a model for peaceful decision-making.

"What it demonstrates is what happens in that building across the street," said Crowley from his office in the Cannon House Office Building. "That people of all different ethnic, religious, racial backgrounds, we don't agree on all the issues, but we agree to disagree, and then we also agree to, on behalf of all of our citizens, try to make a difference in their lives. That's what the democratic process is about."

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